

THE Last Move in the Game. AN ORIGINAL TALE.

CHAPTER I.

The old servants at Falconberg Hall, the seat of Lord Falconberg, near the New Forest, in Hampshire, England, had been dying off rapidly with what Dr. Eddie called a malignant fever; but Joe Martox, the sexton, and Mary Merri, a blind and aged nurse, and Dick Varley, a lawyer's clerk, believed they had been poisoned (with Dr. Eddie's knowledge) for the purpose of covering up a terrible secret with which they were acquainted. Lord Falconberg had two children—his son, Lord Walter, a student at Oxford, and a daughter, Alice, both of whom were great favorites with their dead mother's brother, Ned Backhurst, who lived at the Garage, a few miles from Falconberg Hall.

A road of the New Forest led to the Garage, was exceedingly dangerous and欹, so account of its abrupt termination on the edge of an old and deep quarry. It was the business of Silas Garman, the landlord of the Garage, to see that two lights, one red and the other blue, were kept burning at a little distance from the edge of the precipice, every night, from sunset to sunrise.

One day a couple of disguised strangers stopped at the Garage, and impudently demanded dinner of the landlord, who was at first inclined to resent their hauntings, but after a few whispered words from one of them, the manner of the landlord suddenly changed to obsequiousness.

"Dinner, gentlemen?" he said. "Certainly. The best house we can supply. Perhaps you would prefer a private room?"

"Certainly," answered the younger traveller. "And this pretty girl," he added, attempting to take the hand of Ethel Garman, the landlord's beautiful daughter, who shrank him back. "Shall wait upon us."

"My daughter does not wait upon strangers," observed Ethel's mother, dryly, and Silas conducted his guests to the little parlor, where a cheerful fire was blazing. A whispered conversation took place, which lasted for some time.

"Do not leave Ethel till I return," said Mrs. Garman to the old blind nurse, Mary Merri, who had come in with her grandson, a bright boy named Ralph. "I must hasten to the kitchen and prepare a dinner for these travellers. Strangers seldom stop here except to bait their horses."

"Are they strangers?" asked her visitor.

The landlady regarded her earnestly.

"To me, at least," she replied. "I cannot answer for my husband."

"I do not like these men," observed Ethel, as soon as her mother had withdrawn. "What can bring them here?"

"Evil! Evil to the house of Falconberg!" groaned the blind woman. "The storm has been gathering for years. The clouds are black and heavy. They will bring death. I have known it—it tell it for years—seen it in my dreams, for when I sleep the blessed light returns to me."

"Evil!" repeated the astonished girl. "What evil can possibly threaten these so muchly placed?"

"The lightning strikes the stately oak and leaves the humble shrub unscathed," continued the speaker. "You must watch over those over the noble tree, and when your generous heart has given a helping hand to some in your thoughts, your thoughts, brother, who has listened to the feelings of his heart, fear rather than the suggestions of reason. You must watch these men."

"I will," faltered Ethel, her face turning pale by turns, as she recited the lesson; for she was in mortal peril.

"The hawk shall not replace the falcon in its nest," added the blind nurse, emphatically, "although it has indeed hatched."

The terrors of the Raven now made her appearance from the kitchen, and the speaker took her departure, accompanied by her grandson.

"I thank you, good sir. If any danger threatens, it cannot reach him. Angels will watch over the Lady Alice!"

The best guess that the house could furnish was quickly settled in the little parlor. Silas himself waited for the guests. After a long private conversation they took their leave, to the intense satisfaction of Ethel, who left as a weight had been removed from her heart.

In this same night, which lends its aid to every evil, he carried to his feet, touched the trunk of the tree, and uttered a low groan. "Lord Walter," he whispered. "These above will hold the ends of the cords. Do not look, the feared height may make you dizzy—the firm, and God bless and protect your understanding."

"It must be tried," she continued, with a passionate ardor. "I am here, and help comes. What is my life compared with his safety? I am ready."

Half blinded by tears of adoration and regret, Frank fastened one of the loops carefully round her waist and placed the small bag containing the talismanic ring.

"Give me to him," said a soft voice beside him. "It is Ethel's. The brave girl has heard of Lord Walter's danger, and I trust she will be the one who can bring him back to the scene of action."

"You?" ejaculated the young farmer. "So—not! It would be too terrible!"

"More so than this is," demanded the forest master, regarding the secret of her pure and innocent heart. "I am afraid the tree may possibly bear my weight. It only for a few minutes, till I can throw the rope and leap him, is saved!"

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